

18 ways to catch ego-clinging in the act!

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I can think of two situations in life when it's painfully obvious that ego-clinging is counterproductive. The first is in dealing with very young children. The second is in dealing with dementia. In neither case will you ever win an argument using fact or reason, and when you fail and it feels frustrating, who is it that suffers? It's not me...it's my ego-clinging!

The Buddha pointed to ego-clinging as the root source of all our suffering, but do we really know what it is or how to recognize it? Who is this mysterious shadow lurking behind our every thought and action, spoiling every otherwise perfect experience?

Yes, the Buddha taught that harmful actions are what lead to suffering, but those actions are really the end point of a chain reaction that we can trace back to the destructive emotion that inspired it (desire, anger, pride, jealousy, etc.) and then back from that to the real culprit: ego-clinging, that basic dualistic perspective (ignorance) that sees our self as separate from and at odds with what we perceive as other. We set this chain reaction in motion by the simple fact of seeing everything again and again, moment to moment, from a point of view of self versus other (whether the “versus” is aversion or attachment, or even indifference). Trungpa Rinpoche sometimes called it, simply, ego orientation. It's just the way we see things—the confused perspective that is the nature of samsara and the root of all our suffering.

In three-year retreat, where there are no escapes, where you are in your room alone in one form of meditation or another, hour after hour...day after day...year after year...you begin to catch ego-clinging in the act. There is really not much to do but watch your own mind and reactions, and you start finally to see patterns emerge. You can't necessarily stop the chain reaction at that point, but you begin to get very familiar with it, and that alertness and increasing familiarity are what eventually begin to relax the hold ego-clinging has over us. Every time we identify it, an atom of its death grip is pried loose.

Over the years I've made a list of some of the manifestations in myself that I think of as pointers to ego-clinging, from the most obvious to the more subtle:

1. Selfishness, the obvious stuff—wanting to get something for oneself: the biggest serving, the nicest one, the last piece; to be first, to be best, to be the only one
2. Feeling superior / feeling inferior
3. Judging (ourselves/someone else)
4. Being invested in a particular outcome, can't live with/without it
5. Defensiveness
6. Blaming others
7. Vengefulness, payback
8. Caring whose fault it is
9. Wanting to be right
10. Must have the last word
11. Spinning the storyline / dwelling in the past / fixating on the future
12. Irritation up through rage
13. Embarrassment (though sometimes well earned)
14. Being oversensitive / being a bully, trying to get someone's goat
15. Bad mood / ecstatic mood
16. Happy you won / sad you lost, and all the other [eight worldly concerns](#)
17. Perfectionism
18. Etc.

(Caution: this list is intended for use in recognizing one's own ego-clinging, rather than pointing out other people's: see items 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, etc.)



My mother has Alzheimer's and I have lots

of opportunities to practice recognizing ego-clinging when I'm with her. In Alzheimer's there is no short-term memory so the person truly lives in the present moment—which would be great if the present moment weren't thoroughly inhabited by previously acquired thought patterns. In my mom's present moment, there is rarely any spaciousness, contentedness, or relaxation. She is programmed through lifetimes of habit to find fault with *every single experience*. She's extremely skilled at it. Sometimes she's in a happy mood and my ego-clinging can coast along in relative comfort; when she's cranky or in a rage, it can be really painful.

When Mom says she didn't get any lunch, my impulse is always to say, but I just escorted you from the dining room where you cleaned your plate and polished off dessert. **WRONG!** Just get her a snack. Or sympathize. Her present moment is filled with hunger and distress, whatever may be in her stomach.

When she complains that no one ever visits her, and I just chatted with the caregiver, companion or friend on her way out after spending three hours and taking my mom to feed the ducks, **DON'T SAY IT!** Just sympathize. Her present moment is filled with isolation.

On the way to the doctor, when she asks for the fifteenth time in two minutes whether we are going over a bridge, **SHRIEKING WILL NOT HAVE A POSITIVE OUTCOME!** Just say yes (or no). If she likes bridges, why not yes? (She's also virtually blind.)

Not only does contradiction make her angry and reinforce her vague, painful sense that something is wrong with her—even if she agrees in the moment, she can't retain the information and a few seconds later she will just say it again. Who is it that needs her to acknowledge "the facts"? Ego-clinging!

This process is not as simple as it might sound. Ego-clinging is acutely aware of any threat to its survival, and it is not called "clinging" for nothing. So it's also important to be patient with the whole thing, and just bear in mind that there's an alternative perspective with the potential to help us get through this excruciating moment relatively unscathed. (Ego-clinging can thus be put to use in the service of its own defeat: ultimately, to stop suffering and feel true peace and happiness—what our ego-clinging is trying to accomplish in its own very clumsy, counterproductive way—we have to give up ego-clinging itself, the source of all those fleeting, deceptive impulses toward immediate gratification that only result in increased suffering once the gratification subsides. Et voilà!)

The point isn't that young children or people with dementia or people in general should be humored (though in non-life-threatening circumstances, this can be a helpful tool); it's to use these extreme, unwinnable situations we all find ourselves in to recognize ego-clinging as it happens, to catch ourselves in the act of seeking our own comfort, advantage, or feeling of righteousness, our own wish for things to be the way we want them to be. It's easy to see in these instances precisely because we so clearly can't win.

Jamgon Kongtrul the Great and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche both advise us to speak directly to ego-clinging when we spot it in action. Even if we can't stop ourselves in the present moment from having

to have the last word or taking the biggest piece of cake, we can at least recognize where this comes from, and say, “Ego-clinging, I see you! And I am going to keep watching you and aspiring not to follow you until I get a result. I have the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha on my side, and I am not going to be your slave forever!”

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